

## OLD STORIES FOR NEW LEADERS

# The Eight Habits of Highly Ineffective Principals

BY JODY CAPELLUTI AND KEN NYE



STOCK PHOTO IMAGE

**T**here are plenty of studies that describe the dream principal.

The dream principal is the person that every teacher wants leading their school, the person that students look up to, and the person parents go to for advice. However, because there are not a lot of studies that describe the bad-dream principal, we created our own “study” to come up with the characteristics of ineffective principals. Our study was conducted with the participation of a group of interning principals—classroom teachers who are training to become principals. We asked these future principals to recall the least effective principal they had ever worked with and tell us why that principal was ineffective. We incorporated their responses with our own observations that were made during visits to myriad schools and, with apologies to Stephen Covey, created the following eight habits of highly ineffective principals.

**Ineffective principals avoid conflict.** The ineffective principal

wants to get along with everyone. These principals make statements like “Until everyone is on board, we’re not going forward.” Such inaction causes staff members to lose respect for the principal and his or her ideas. Effective principals view conflict as a creative way to find solutions to problems. Conflict or resistance, unless it paralyzes an individual or organization, is a healthy part of the work culture. Good principals provide an environment where intellectual conflict is viewed as healthy.

**Ineffective principals don’t follow through.** Ineffective principals don’t finish things. They don’t get back to people who were promised answers, they don’t respond positively to people who have differing points of view, and they propose great ideas at faculty meetings but do not follow up on them.

**Ineffective principals measure their success by how the day went.** There is an old adage that if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. This is

especially true when it comes to the principal’s role in school improvement. Every successful school needs a vision for the future and an effective principal will provide the guidance necessary to involve the entire school community in creating this vision. Outstanding principals are guided by a strong sense of purpose and act in ways that reinforce and support the school’s greater vision.

**Ineffective principals don’t listen.** Ineffective principals are impressed with the sound of their own voices. When another person is talking, instead of listening, an ineffective principal thinks about what he or she is going to say next. People want the principal to hear between the lines and understand what they are saying. People know when they are being listened to, and they will become quickly disenchanted by a nonlistening principal.

**Ineffective principals prefer style over substance.** There is an expression that golfers use: “Drive for show and putt for dough.” In other words, although a 300-yard drive down the center of the fairway may look great, it is all for naught if you miss a two-foot putt. Ineffective principals are concerned about doing things that put the school or themselves in a positive

*Jody Capelluti is a professor of educational leadership at the University of Southern Maine. He was a principal for 13 years, and during his 10 years at the middle level, his school was named a National School of Excellence. Ken Nye is a clinical lecturer in the Educational Leadership Program at the University of Southern Maine. He was a high school principal for 23 years, and in 1993, he was Maine’s Principal of the Year.*

light but don't spend time doing the things that will improve the school.

***Ineffective principals are not visible.*** A common complaint about ineffective principals is "She always stays in her office" or "We never see him." The ineffective principal uses his or her office as a refuge from school issues and problems. The principal who is rarely seen during the hustle and bustle of the school day will become the butt of quips in the teachers' room (e.g., "Our leader was sighted today"). Teachers, students, and parents want to feel that the principal knows them, understands what is going on in the classrooms, and is sensitive to the pulse and climate of the school.

***Ineffective principals hedge the truth.*** Someone once said that "you don't need to worry about your poor memory if you always tell the truth." Principals who shape their answers to satisfy their listeners will

## SHARE YOUR GOOD IDEAS WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES

*Principal Leadership* is looking for manuscripts for 2004–05. You can contribute to *PL* in several ways:

- Write a feature article of 2,000 words (see p. 67)
- Share a best practice in 1,200 words for the "Tips for Principals" column
- Profile a theme-related program at your school in 750 words
- Participate in the *PL* photo contest (see page 68).

become enmeshed in a web of confusion and half-truths. Teachers who work with one of these principals will start to compare notes: "Here's what he told me. What did he tell you?"

***Ineffective principals are unable to complete multiple tasks on time.*** Due to trying to do too

many things and a lack of time we have been unable to finish this column as we had originally planned. Actually, even if we had completed it on time, it looks as if there wouldn't have been enough space in the column to include it anyway. We're supposed to keep...get back to you later. Gotta go. **PL**

*Advertisement*